



The Commonwealth Resounds!

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**MUSIC OF UGANDA.
By Peter Cooke**



**with demonstrations by Albert Bisaso Ssempeke, Mathew Watmon,
Constantine Odida, and Alex Nyeko.
Hosted by The Ndere Centre in the Auditorium
Saturday 25th November, 10.00 a.m.**

The session began with us listening to a recording - the playing of music for the two-holed Ekinimba flute - Uganda's longest flute, played by Isaka Rwangampunwe a herdsman who was recorded on a hillside in Bunyarwanda, southwestern Uganda in 1968. It was chosen as an example of virtually the only kind of instrumental music in Uganda which is not based on words or songs.



Ekinimba notched flute with two fingerholes (made from a Lobelia flower spike).

This was then followed by illustrations of the process by which Ugandan instrumentalists compose and perform instrumental accompaniments as they sing.

Albert Bisaso, son of the late Albert Ssempeke (one of Buganda's most famous musicians) demonstrated, using his *ennanga* (arched harp). He performed a well-known traditional Kiganda song called "Gganga aluwa", composed after an event that took place in the palace of the Kabaka of Buganda, when a youthful page called Gganga sexually harassed one of the princesses (Nassolo) and was punished but not executed for his crime.

But firstly we discussed Albert's *ennanga* with its eight strings and little lizard-skin rings sewn around the instrument's neck just below each string. They are positioned so as to make grazing contact with each string and result in a gentle buzzing quality of sound as the low-pitched strings are plucked in rapid succession. One could well compare it to the buzzing of bees in a hive or, the murmuring of the human voices. Albert demonstrated how all the notes which make up the melodies of the most important text utterances (key texts) that he sang lay within the dense cyclical pattern he plucked. Other notes had been added to the main melody notes to create a continuous stream of sound (the 'tone bank') - a cycle repeated every six main beats (36 notes in all) with the fingers and thumbs of his two hands plucking alternately at high speed.

Harp tone row

M 1
-lo Gga nga... Ba - mu - te - ma - k'en - ga - lo bi - tu - ndu Gga - nga 'lu - la Na - sso -

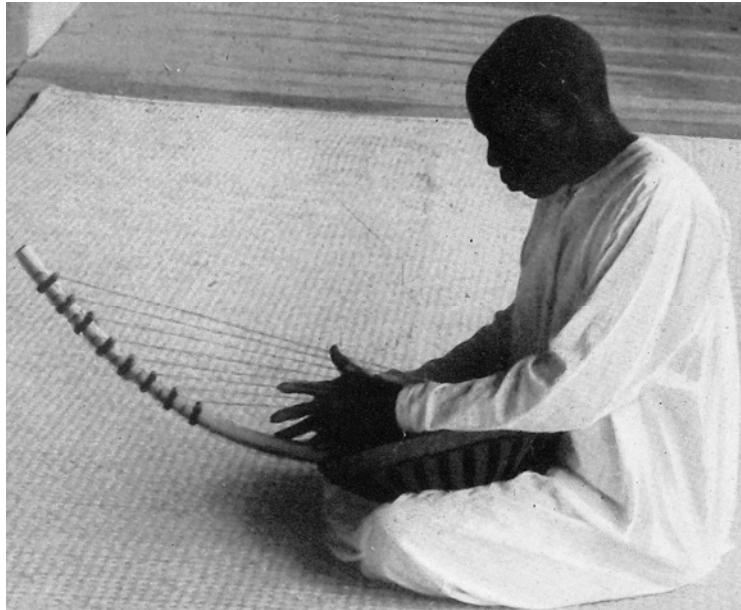
M 3
-ga 'lu - la e - nga - l'e - nga lo Gga - nga 'lu - la Gga -

M 2
t'e - nga - lo ba - zi - te - ma - ko La b'o ba - we - ga - na ka - le - re -

M 4
o - ge - nda kwo - ge - ra o - kee ra wa lee -

R 1 -ro
wa - nvu nze gwa - li - kwa - ta - k'a - li - kaa - ba "Ya - ye baa - ba!" Na - nyi - ni mu - o - mu

The notation above shows (just below the complete tone bank sounded on the harp) five melodic utterances and one recited line, commonly performed in this song. They were transcribed by Andy Cooke from the singing of the greatest palace harper of the previous century - Temutewo Mukasa. Despite the freedom with which the melodies move up or down into different octaves and the occasional anticipations and ornamentations one can trace how well the melodies he sang fitted with the pattern repeated on the harp and how the singer can begin an utterance at any point in the cycle if he hears harp pitches that will fit the tonal outline of texts..



Temutewo Mukasa

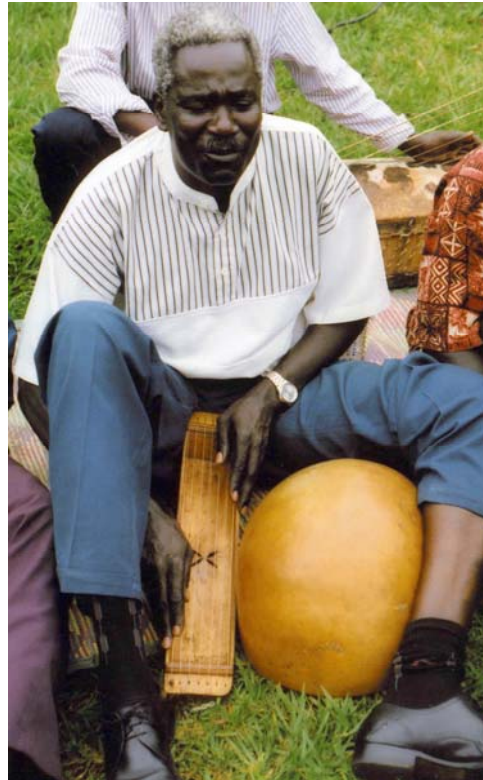
(photo. K.P. Wachsmann)

Musicians frequently announced their performances saying, “I am going to play the song” (or ‘beat’ or “blow the song”).... Then they would begin with their instrument playing for some time (while listening to where their words will fit into the instrumental pattern) before launching into song. Albert Bisaso did just this and had us transfixed with his fluent playing and singing.

We then asked the question - is this the case only for the Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Uganda? For help we turned to three fine musicians, members of the WatMon Cultural Group who come from Acoli district in northern Uganda and who speak a very different language, a dialect of the Nilotic Luo language group. Mathew Watmon with his son Constantin Odida and Alex Nyeko firstly sang as they played on their seven-string *nanga* trough-zithers. The same kind of dense cyclical pattern was heard, though it was less obvious to non-Acoli listeners how the instrumental part related to the sung melodies, partly because of the fact that soloist Watmon and his chorus overlapped each other at times with occasional harmonies in 4th and 5ths.



Watmon and Constantin playing their *nangas*.



It proved clearer in the case of their *okeme* songs. Constantin and Alex, after showing us their Okemes (one treble and one bass instrument) with their double ranks of keys which allowed them to duplicate the same pitches at high speed in their songs). The song they played, 'Too Paco', was a sad one relating how they had been caused to flee their villages in northern Acoli-land because of the misdeeds of Joseph Kony and his so-called Lords Resistance Army and how they were longing for peace talks to succeed so that they could return home. As with Albert's Kiganda song, and their own *nanga* song the instrumental cycle was dense, the shortest of sounds (shown in the notation below as semiquavers) continuing throughout the cycle.



A trio of Watmon Group okemes (the instruments held near the ground sound more strongly)

Small Okemes

Tenor okeme

cycle 4

6 & 7

16

18

24

An do gang wa dong...abur do cwero cwi-nyi ba

To gang wa gang wa dong...obur ma - twal cwi - nyi ba

An,ay - el - a wi-lobo ka iwin - yo ??

?? Ken-neth Ba-nya wan wa - le-go in keken in il - ok ki'tino A-cho-li

Jal Ko ny i - dwog gang war wa - te loki rac cwero cwi- nyi ba

Again we could hear the melodies that the musicians sang reflected within the background pattern of sounds played on the *okeme-s*, as they expertly played their parts both individually and in consort. Peter asked Alex about the prominent pitch F sung for the syllable 'gang' at the start of cycles 6 and 7 because he could not hear it in the pattern played on the Constantin's small *okeme*. He replied that this line was the choral response, belonging mainly to the bass *okeme*, (not transcribed) and he promptly showed us how clearly it sounded in his own bass. He and Constantin told us that once the main melody notes had been picked out on their *okeme-s* when creating a song they would then fill out the rest of the cycle with notes that 'rhymed' (ie. enriched the texture with 4ths and 5ths) thus at the same time creating a dense pattern within which one could hear or create other texts. Like the Bantu languages their language was a also tonal language - i.e. words had their own distinct tonal outlines that would normally be observed when singing. They told us further that they usually played in a team of four or five *okeme* players for the dancing of their sisters and other girls at lively inter-village competitions and it was this spirit of competition that led through practice to such virtuosity their consort playing - a virtuosity that was obvious to all of us present.

All in all it provided a fascinating insight into the compositional processes employed by these talented Ugandan musicians.

Dr. Cooke's lecture was attended by international musicians from The Commonwealth Resounds!, musicians from the Ndere Troupe and people from the locality of Ntinda.

It was a most rewarding and interesting experience for all concerned.

**Alison Cox – Founder and Musical Director
The Commonwealth Resounds!**

Related publications.

THREE CDs

Uganda: Village ensembles of Busoga CD VDE CD 925, Geneva 1997 (Archives Internationales de Musique Populaire, Geneva and Disques VDE-GALLO Lausanne)

The King's Musicians - Royalist Music of Buganda - Uganda. CD with 24-page booklet. Topic Records London TSCD925, 2003

Ssempeke! Traditional music from Buganda - songs with xylophone, harp, lyre and flute accompaniments. CD 1988/2006.

Watmon Cultural Troupe. Acholi music for Okeme Nanga Adungu from the amadinda website below as either individual tracks, or Mp3 album, or CD. 2006

Further information on all these sound recordings can be found at

<http://www.amadinda.co.uk/>

ARTICLES

by Peter Cooke:-

"**Ganda Xylophone Music: Another Approach**", *African Music*, iv/4 (1970), 6;

"**Ssematimba ne Kikwabanga: The music and poetry of a Ganda historical song**", *World of Music*, xxix/2, (1987) 49-68 (jointly with Francis Katamba)

"**Orchestral Melo-Rhythm in Southern Uganda**", *For Gerhard Kubik - Festschrift on the occasion of his 60th birthday*, (Frankfurt, 1995), 147-160.

"**Music in a Ugandan Court**", *Early Music*, August 1996 439-452 "Was Ssempeke just being kind? Listening to instrumental music in Africa south of the Sahara", for *World of Music*, 1(1999). 73-83..

"**Musical competitions in Northern Uganda**" [published as "Ngoma Competitions..."] in *Mashindano! Competitive Music Performance in East Africa*, ed. F. Gunderson and Greg. Barz (Dar es Salaam, 2000).

by Andrew. Cooke and James Micklem:-

"**Ennanga harp songs of Buganda - Temutewo Mukasa's "Gganga Alula"**."

African Music, Vol 7 no. 4, 1999, p 47-65



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